Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1190

Saunders, Justine

(1953 - 2007)

Born	19530101, Near Rockhampton Queensland Australia
Died	20070415
Occupation	Actor, Teacher

Summary

Justine Saunders was a member of the stolen generations of Aboriginal people. She became a professional actor in 1974 and was important to the establishment of Aboriginal theatre groups in the 1980s and 1990s.

Details

Justine Saunders, of Darumbal descent, was born next to a railway track during floods around Quilpie in Queensland. Her mother Heather was a stockwoman and belonged to the Woppaburra people from the Kanomie clan of Keppel Island. At the age of 11, Justine was taken from her mother and spent five years in a convent school is Brisbane. Here she had her first acting experience in productions of *Finian's Rainbow* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. She joined the Aboriginal Black Theatre Art and Culture Centre company in Redfern soon after it was established, her first part being in Bob Merritt's play *The Cake Man* . Her television debut was in the ABC production of *Pig in a Poke*.

Saunders became a professional actor in 1974, although she later complained about stereotypical Aboriginal roles at the time. Her first film appearance was in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), followed by *Women of the Sun* (1982) and *The Fringe Dwellers* (1985), the latter being the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust's production of *Not the 1988 Party*, a revue run as a counter to the official bicentenary celebrations. She also had a part in Lorna Bol's play *A Special Place* (1989).

In addition to acting, Justine helped establish the Black Theatre and the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, taught drama at the Eora Centre, and participated in the 1987 and 1988 national indigenous playwrights conferences. She was declared the Aboriginal Artist of the Year by NADOC in 1985, and received an Order of Australia Medal for her service to the performing arts and national Aboriginal theatre in 1991. In 2000, though, she asked Aboriginal senator Aden Ridgeway to return her medal after the Federal Government denied the term 'stolen generation'.

Justine Saunders died in April 2007 at the age of 54 after a series of illnesses. She is survived by her partner, Peter Whittle.

Published resources

Book
Women of the sun, Maris, Hyllus and Sonia Borg, 1985

Review
Women of the sun: setting the record straight, Lewis, Stephanie, 1982

Edited Book
The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia : Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture, Horton, David, 1994

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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Created 25 May 2005
Last modified 16 September 2013